

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 7-19WASHINGTON TIMES
22 January 1986

French spy agencies, army in shambles

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THE WASHINGTON TIMES FOREIGN SERVICE

PARIS — Interference by Socialist politicians, press leaks and frequent reorganization have demoralized and weakened the French Intelligence Services, once considered among Europe's best.

Also affected are the French armed forces. Military leaders have publicly complained about insufficient funds for defense, out-dated armor, lack of adequate radar systems and, above all, the Socialists' fear of the military's traditionally conservative leanings.

Francois Leotard, one of the more vocal members of the conservative opposition, claimed recently that France's military leaders "have been put in a situation of irritation, bitterness and despair through socialist mistrust."

The government of Premier Laurent Fabius has dismissed such statements as campaign rhetoric for the March 16 legislative elections. But some officials admit privately that the security services have indeed been shaken and the quality of military materiel leaves a lot to be desired.

The malaise within the French intelligence community came to the surface with last July's sinking in New Zealand of the Greenpeace movement flagship Rainbow Warrior. Some officials claimed the affair was a "sabotage of sabotages" aimed at destabilizing the French security services.

Problems within the military were first aired last November by Gen. Philippe Arnold, who commanded one of the three French armored divisions stationed in West Germany. Bluntly, he told visiting newsmen that the main French battle tank was outdated and that a new version known as AMX 30B2 would not reach his division until two years from now.

He also claimed that France would need 10 years to design a new tank and 20 years to produce it on a massive scale. Gen. Arnold said that

while the total strength of France's armor was about 1,000 combat vehicles, West Germany was replacing its old generation tanks at the rate of 1,000 a year and the Soviet Union at 1,000 every four months.

Gen. Arnold was immediately suspended by Defense Minister Paul Quiles. But his outburst was followed by other disclosures which alarmed conservative politicians and forced the socialist government to issue a barrage of statements explaining its defense policies.

For example, it was disclosed that no funding was available for radar planes, the equivalent of U.S. AWACs, and nothing was being done about the development of the new

ground-to-ground SX missile, on the drawing board since 1976.

The conservative press, including the respected Le Figaro, reported that the military Transal transport plane was becoming outdated and no longer capable of satisfying the needs of the French divisions earmarked for rapid intervention overseas.

The government skirted the question, instead stressing the high quality of French communications equipment, citing the purchase of the Rita system by the United States.

Nonetheless, the feeling of frustration continues to plague the military and particularly the intelligence services.

These consist of two main organizations: the DGSE [Direction Generale De La Securite Exterieur] which runs France's overseas intelligence operation and the DST [Direction De La Surveillance Territoire], a counter-espionage service with an impressive record of arrests and expulsion of Soviet agents.

It was the DST that caused the 1983 expulsion of 47 soviet "diplomats" from Paris on charges of spying. DST chief Yves Bonnet was removed by the Socialist establishment which was concerned

about France's relations with the Soviet Union.

After the DST identified a chief Soviet KGB "resident" in France, Vladislav Nitchkov, and subsequent to Mr. Bonnet's removal, the organization underwent drastic purges, apparently affecting its network of informants.

Equally shaken up was the DGSE which was involved in the bungled Rainbow Warrior operation, in which a Greenpeace photographer was killed. Its new head is Gen. Rene Imbot, a veteran Foreign Legion commander who admitted on French television that his service was full of "rotten planks" and needed drastic surgery.

According to well-informed sources, the DGSE is now being reinforced by a special crack commando unit which has taken on the name of the 11th "shop battalion" of Indochina and Algerian campaign fame.

Western sources claim that the main weakness of the DGSE is the fact that it is a predominately military rather than an intelligence organization.

To wit: most of its members are not career intelligence agents but army officers seconded for periods varying between two to six years. They usually work as military attaches in French embassies and follow a "military work pattern" which affects their value in the field of espionage.

British sources say that the "amateurism" of the DSGE was largely responsible for the Rainbow Warrior affair.